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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at an American university to collect data on how native English-speaking students asked questions in class. The data were analyzed for use of syntactic forms, formulaic expressions or prefatory comments, terms of address, functions fulfilled by the questions, and politeness markers. The results were then compared with the content of material published for use in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. The instructional materials revealed a lack of material addressing the specific function of asking questions of a professor in class. What little material did exist tended to stress one particular form or function that may not be representative of native speaker usage and behavior, and may not address the range of needs of foreign students at an American university. Some specific rules governing teacher-student communication are outlined for incorporation into ESL instruction. Contains 46 references. (Author/MSE)

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AMERICAN STUDENTS' QUESTIONING BEHAVIOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ESL

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ABSTRACT

Work in pragmatics and the few studies that have been done on foreign students' classroom behavior indicate that asking questions of a professor in class is culturally specific behavior. Foreign students preparing for study at an American university may need instruction on the conventions of how to ask questions of a professor in class.

A pilot study was conducted in an American university to collect natural data on how native English speaking students asked questions in class. The data were analyzed to determine and correlate the use of syntactic forms, formulaic expressions or prefactory comments, terms of address, functions fulfilled by the questions, and politeness markers. These data were compared with material published for ESL students.

The examination of ESL materials revealed a dearth of material addressing the specific function of asking questions of a professor in class. Those few materials that do exist tend to stress one particular form or function which may not be representative of native speaker usage and behavior and may not address the range of needs of international students at an American university.

INTRODUCTION

For international students in an American university, asking questions of a professor in class provides a way to clarify their understanding and increase comprehension. The asking of questions in class also allows international students to participate fully in and profit from their American academic experience by following the conventions of the U.S. classroom.

However, asking questions in class is culturally specific behavior. Whether questions are asked at all and how questions are asked will vary cross-culturally, and ESL students may need instruction in the conventions and norms of class participation in an American setting. In order

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to be effective, the instruction given to ESL students should be based on real-life language use by native speakers.

How do native English speaking university students ask questions in class? And to what extent do published ESL materials reflect actual native speaker behavior in this area? The pilot study to be described here was designed to answer these two general questions. The aims of the study were to collect natural data from native speaking students and to compare these data with published materials designed for ESL students.

Research Questions

From the assumption that foreign students need to understand American students' classroom behavior and that access to such information can help international students function in an American academic setting, a small pilot research project was initiated to gather data on how American students ask questions of their professors in class and how the data from native speakers compared with what is taught to ESL students. The project sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do native speakers ask questions of their professors in class, specifically:
   a. What syntactic structures are used?
   b. Are prefactory comments or formulae routinely used?
   c. What address terms are used?
   d. What functions do the questions fulfill?
   e. Are particular forms associated with particular functions?
   f. What politeness markers are used?
2. How do the materials published for ESL students compare with native speaker data in the above areas?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Numerous ethnographic studies have documented differing cultural views of silence and volubility, including such issues as when speech is appropriate and when inappropriate and whether one can ask questions and about what (e.g., Tannen, 1984; Goody, 1978; Scollon, 1985; Basso, 1970). The cross-cultural variation in attitudes towards silence or volubility extends to classroom behavior as well, and specifically to the appropriateness of students asking questions in class (e.g., Dumont, 1972; Philips, 1972; Goody, 1978).

One empirical study of foreign students' classroom behavior indicated that foreign students in general asked fewer questions than did their American classmates in science classes (Shaw and Bailey, 1990), and another study concluded that some groups of foreign students may be more reticent than others (Sato, 1982).

Yet asking questions can have clear benefits for students, both native speakers and non-native speakers alike. A number of psychological studies have indicated a correlation between asking questions, increased comprehension and retention of material and successful task completion (Fishbein, et al., 1990; Schober & Clark, 1989; Gevelek & Raphael, 1985). Furthermore, early experimental studies suggested that, in the United States, volubility is viewed

positively, whereas silence is viewed negatively (Capella, 1985); does this perception extend to professors' perceptions of their students? If the conclusions reached by these studies are correct, then negative consequences accrue for non-native speaking students who remain silent in class. Not only may they miss opportunities to clarify content not fully understood, but their silence may also be viewed negatively by their professors, possibly leading to teacher bias and a subsequent self-fulfilling prophecy (Jussim, 1989).

Despite these possible negative consequences, there are powerful reasons for international students to shy away from asking questions, aside from reasons such as timidity or insecurity about their English. Asking questions of a professor in class is pragmatically loaded behavior that is potentially face-threatening. The function of a question is to elicit a response from an addressee, and a question can thus be an imposition on the addressee (Kearsley, 1976); by asking a question, the student, who is perforce of a lower status than the professor in the classroom, requires a response from the professor on a subject of the student's choosing. Furthermore, simply by asking the question, a student may imply that the professor is responsible for the student's lack of understanding (Goody, 1978; Brown & Levinson, 1978).

It is not only the less talkative students who may face problems, however. Those students from cultures in which questions or requests are posed more directly than in English risk offending their professors and classmates with what is perceived, but not intended, to be rudeness (Saville-Troike, 1980).

To negotiate this potential pragmatic minefield, the international student needs to know how to ask questions politely in order to avoid face-threatening behavior. The force of the question may be softened via various forms of indirectness, which can mitigate the imposition upon the addressee (Allwin, 1991; Brown and Levinson, 1978). However, as the existence of a copious literature on the subject attests, considerable cross-cultural variation exists in levels of directness and indirectness considered polite in a given situation (e.g., House & Kasper, 1981; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1992; Janney & Arndt, 1992). Without knowledge of the choices underlying pragmatic conventions in American university classrooms, international students cannot participate fully in their U.S. education or may give unintended offense (Shaw & Bailey, 1990; Thomas, 1983). If ESL teachers are to help their students in this respect, a prerequisite is a knowledge of what conventions native speaking students actually use.

PROCEDURE: COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF NATIVE SPEAKER DATA

Aims

In order to discover what conventions native speakers actually use, this study was designed to collect completely natural data from native speakers. To serve this purpose, the researcher acted as a participant observer in American classrooms. This method was chosen in preference to elicitation. Eliciting from native speakers what they suppose they would say in a given situation may produce language that is idiosyncratic or more polite than they would actually use (Wolfson, Marmor, & Jones, 1989; Cf., e.g., M. Williams, 1988).

Data Collection

Since this was a pilot study, the researcher used a sample of convenience. A total of 33 hours of graduate classes in linguistics was observed at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Class size varied from 15 to 45 students. Observation was conducted between the fourth and eighth weeks of a 15 week semester. Each observation session lasted the full length of one lesson and thus varied between 45 minutes and two and a half hours, according to the length of the class session being observed.

During an observation session, each question asked by a native speaker was written down by the researcher. A total of 229 utterances was collected, although 15 of these 229 utterances were not fully recorded because of inaudibility or other factors. Since the aim was to collect completely natural data in this pilot study, a video or tape recorder, which might have inhibited the subjects or not picked up the sound adequately, was not used. In further studies, however, this mode of recording would be reconsidered.

Data Excluded

Because of the aims of the study and the method of data collection, certain types of data were not recorded. Since the primary aim was to collect native speaker utterances, those questions asked by non-native speaking students were not noted. For practical reasons, questions asked by the researcher were excluded, as were paralinguistic data and professors' responses to questions. Furthermore, although paralinguistic information and the professors' responses would provide extremely interesting additional data, they fell outside the specific research questions this pilot study was designed to answer.

Analysis of Utterances

Once observations were complete, each utterance was classified according to the syntactic form, use of preface or formula, function, and use of address terms. The subcategories used within each classification arose from the data actually collected and were designed to be mutually exclusive. When the initial classifications were complete, a comparison was made between form and function, and a separate analysis was made of politeness markers used. In this way, the data were utilized to answer the research questions of the study.

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS OF NATIVE SPEAKER DATA

Syntax

A total of 214 utterances were complete and could be analyzed according to syntactic form. Results of the analysis of syntactic form are summarized in Table 1 and represented graphically in Figure 1. Of the total number of utterances, two-thirds were posed in the form of a syntactic question using inversion; yes/no questions accounted for almost half of all utterances. Of those utterances which could be classified as statements (i.e., without inversion), the

large majority were statements uttered with rising intonation, so-called uninverted questions.

Table 1: Syntax
n= 214 utterances were complete and could be analyzed

Questions with inversion n= 141 (65.9%)

WH- questions *n= 48 (22.4% of total)*

What + VP n= 20
"What's the etymology of the word Creole?"

How n= 9
"How can they know that?"

What/How about n= 8
"What about constructions such as ...?"

Why n= 5
"Why doesn't it carry over to other words?"

Where n= 3
"Where do you place the barred i?"

Who n= 2

When n= 1

Yes/No questions *n= 93 (43.5% of total)*

Affirmative:

be/do/have n= 51
"Is the speaker a Japanese speaker?"

modal n= 27
"Could you give an example?"

Negative:

be/do/have n= 11
"But doesn't that get changed a lot?"

modal n= 4
"Wouldn't that be an overgeneralization?"

Statements (without inversion) n=46 (21.5%)

Statements with rising intonation *n= 34 (15.9% of total)*
"You mean you're talking about modern English?"
"All of the variables were the same?"

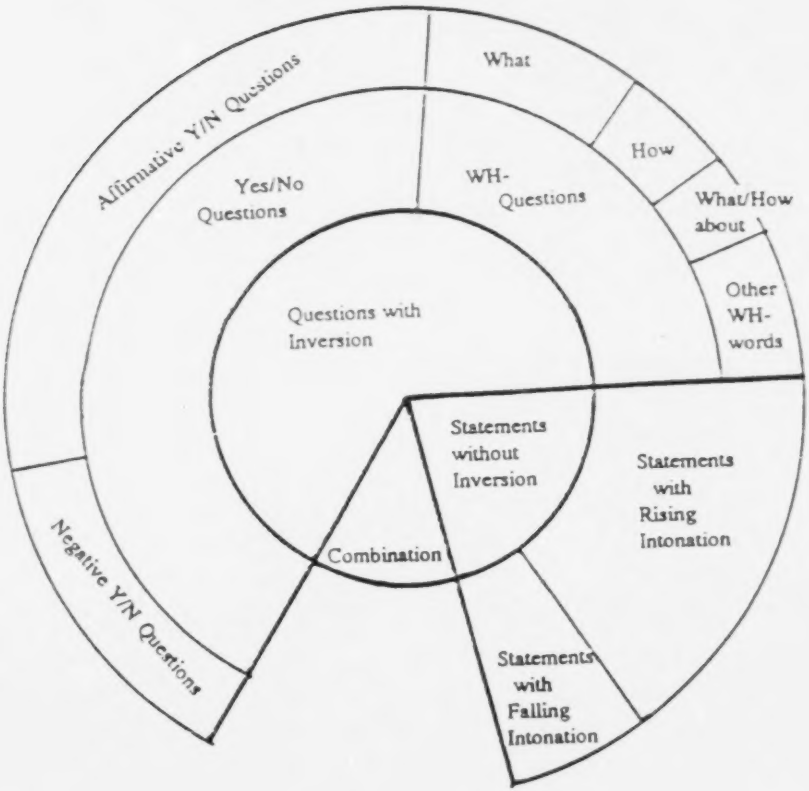
Statements with falling intonation *n= 12 (5.6% of total)*
"I thought the insertion of be was a leftover from Gullah."
"I'm just having a hard time contrasting between this and contrastive analysis."

Combination n=27 (12.6%)

"How did he arrive at 90? Why did he rule out 80?"

"What is the criteria, then? There has to be a change in language or what?"

Figure 1: Syntax



Use of Preface or Formulaic Expression

All 229 utterances collected could be analyzed according to use of prefactory comments. The results are summarized in Table 2 and Figure 2. Perhaps surprisingly, well over two-thirds of the utterances used no preface whatsoever. Of those utterances that began with some sort of preface, not quite half used a preface with a "question" word such as wonder ("I was just wondering"), question ("I have a question..."), or ask ("Can I just ask..."). Another fairly common preface was a short connecting word such as so, but, now, and used at the beginning of the utterance. Also represented were references to the professor's earlier remarks or some-

thing encountered in the assigned reading. A minuscule proportion of all utterances (6 out of 229, or 2.3%) began with an apology, explanation for the question, or disclaimer.

Use of Address Terms

In only 3 occurrences in the 229 utterances collected were address terms used, representing 1.3% of the total. Of these 3 occurrences, there was one instance of use of the professor's first name, one of title plus last name ("Professor X"), and one use of sir (uttered by a mature male student who had retired from the Army).

Table 2: Preface or Formulaic Expression
n=229

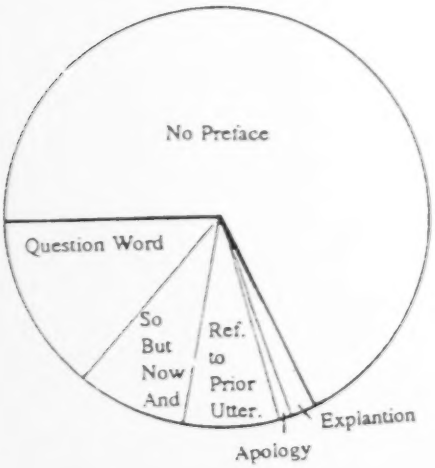
No preface/formulaic expression	n= 156 (68.1%)
Preface/formulaic expression used	n= 73 (31.9%)
Question word	*n= 31 (13.5% of total)*
wonder	n= 10
"I was just wondering..."	
"I wondered..."	
question	n= 13
"Could I ask a question?"	
"I have a question (about)..."	
"Just one quick question..."	
ask/ clarify	n= 8
"Can I just ask (how/ where)..."	
"I just wanted to (ask/clarify)..."	
"Just for clarification..."	
Short connector	*n= 19 (8.3% of total)*
so	n= 11
"So is it safe to say that..."	
"So what does that prove?"	
but	n= 4
"But didn't you say before..."	
now	n= 3
"Now is New York [r]-less?"	
and	n= 1
"And that didn't inhibit them... ?"	
Reference to prior utterance	*n= 17 (7.4% of total)*
"You said that ..."	

"In the reading, it says that... "
"On the same topic, then..."
"This trade jargon, Chinook? ..."

Explanation/ Disclaimer *n= 3 (1.3% of total)*
"I've always been interested in slavery. Was there a pidgin..."
"This might sound trivial, but..."

Apology *n= 3 (1.3% of total)*
"Excuse me, was that last one Richards as well?"
"I'm sorry, what's the title?"

Figure 2: Use of Preface



Function

Of the complete utterances collected, 202 could be classified according to function, the results of which are summarized in Table 3 and Figure 3. Of the functions represented, not quite half of the utterances (46.5%) fulfilled the purpose of asking for unknown information relative to the lesson content. Approximately one-fifth of the utterances (21.8%) were instances in which the student questioned or restated some aspect of the lesson in order to confirm his or her understanding. In approximately 15% of the utterances, students requested the professor to repeat or clarify something or to perform a specific action such as spelling or pronouncing a word. In a similar number of instances, students invited the professor's comments on a student-supplied example or solution to a problem or on some student-supplied contradictory information. The remaining functions accounted for a very small percentage of the total and included rephrasing a question the professor had misunderstood and asking per-

mission.

Table 3: Functions

n= 202 utterances could be classified according to function

Asking unknown information — n= 94 (46.5%)

"What's the difference between compounds like pickpocket and redcap?"
"Are they trying to say there was a change in teaching?"
"Are all lingua francas creoles?"

Confirmation check — n= 44 (21.8%)

"There are predictable areas of fossilization?"
"Does this mean it's okay to use... ?"
"Everything you've said relates to child acquisition?"

Requests — n= 30 (14.9%)

Repetition — *n= 19*

"Would you mind repeating?"
"Would you be able to/ Could you repeat...?"

Specific action — *n= 6*

"Could you just spell/ pronounce/ give and example...?"

Clarification — *n= 5*

"Could you (please/just) clarify/ go through it?"

Inviting the professor's comment — n= 29 (14.4%)

"What about the Moors in Spain?"
"Could that be because... ?"
"Can't it just be irregular?"

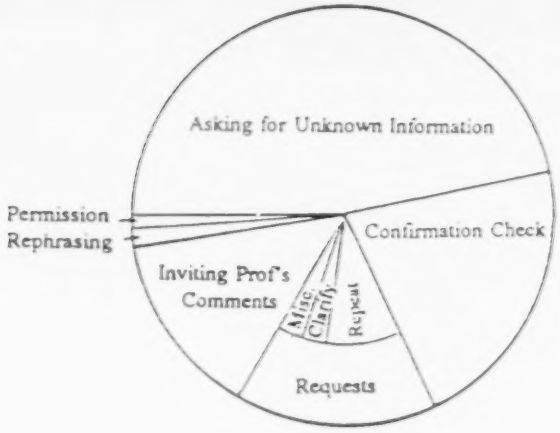
Rephrasing a question — n= 3 (1.5%)

"No, what I'm saying is ..."

Asking permission — n= 2 (1%)

"May we hand it in on the 17th?"

Figure 3: Functions



Form and Function

Asking for unknown information. As Table 4 and Figure 4 show, students asked for unknown information in the vast majority of cases by asking questions with inversion (86.1%). This function, however, was achieved more often by a yes/no question (46 utterances out of 94, 48.9%) than by a WH- question (35 utterances out of 94, 37.2%). However, of all WH- questions asked, 87.5% were used for the function of asking for unknown information, which is not particularly surprising since the answer expected from a WH- question is some form of unknown information.

Confirmation Checks. Of the 44 utterances which were classified as confirmation checks, fully half of them were made as statements with rising intonation (See Table 5, Figure 5). This function accounts for almost two-thirds of the occurrences of this form. In general, the use of a syntactic statement with rising intonation used as an uninverted question is very common among native speakers of English as a way of confirming or clarifying understanding (J. Williams, 1989). Another quarter of the confirmation checks were expressed as yes/no questions.

Table 4: Form and Function
Asking for Unknown Information
n= 94 (100%)

Questions with inversion	n= 81 (86.1%)
Yes/No questions	*n= 46*
"Is that related to fossilization at all?"	
"Do you ask the students questions?"	

WH- questions *n= 35*

[After the professor said that finger does not rhyme with singer] "Why?"
"How many times should this be done?"

Other n= 13 (13.9%)

Table 5: Form and Function
Confirmation Checks
n= 44 (100%)

Statement with rising intonation n= 22 (50%)

"So it would only be a lingua franca if it wasn't an official language?"
"If a student uses a wrong vocabulary word, just ignore it?"

Yes/No questions n= 11 (25%)

"Just for clarification, do you want a summary, an overview?"
"So is it safe to say that ...?"

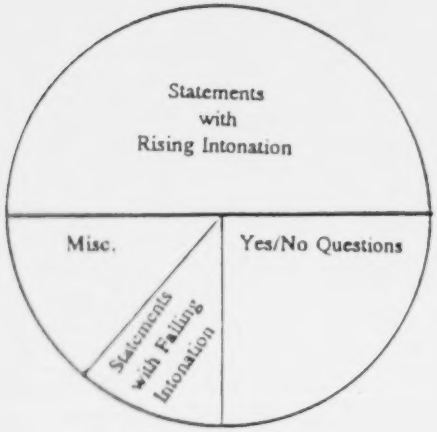
Statement with falling intonation n= 5 (11.4%)

[Summarizing alternative solutions to a problem] "None of those is wrong. It could be any."

Miscellaneous n= 6 (13.6%)

Figure 4: Form and Function
Asking for Unknown Information

Figure 5: Form and Function
Confirmation Checks



Politeness and requests. When students make requests or invite the professor's comments, there is greater potential for giving offense or for face-threatening than is the case with asking unknown information or making a confirmation check.

In the 30 instances of requests, questions with modals were used for over half the requests (See Table 6, Figure 6). This includes almost all uses of Could you... . Other polite forms account for almost all the rest of the requests, including various forms of interrogatives, statements with rising intonation (including hesitancy), and statements with falling intonation in which the subject is I. These statements, such as "I just missed what you said...", are used as indirect hints or implied requests. The use of such measures of indirectness-- interrogatives, rising intonation, hints-- mitigates the imposition of the request on the addressee (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Politeness and inviting the professor's comments. The function of inviting the professor's comments is potentially most face-threatening to the professor (See Table 7, Figure 7). It is interesting to note that in these instances, the syntactic forms are hedged with uncertainty. Just over half of the utterances serving this function are expressed as yes/no questions or as statements with rising intonation (the uninverted question).

When the student asks the professor to comment on a student-supplied example, the implication could be that the professor is to be faulted for not having supplied the information himself or not having taken this example into account. All uses of What/How about... served the function of introducing a student-supplied example, for which the professor's comments were elicited.

Even more threatening is the student-supplied counter-example or contradiction. In fact,

half of the occurrences of all negative yes/no questions fulfill the function of inviting the professor's comments and were particularly noted when the student was actually contradicting or disagreeing with the professor. While the use of negation expresses disagreement, the force is mitigated by use of the interrogative form, which invites the professor to comment without overtly disagreeing.

Table 6: Form and Function
Requests
n= 30 (100%)

Questions with modal	n= 16 (53.3%)
"Can you just pronounce Long Island?	
"Would you mind reading that again, please?"	
"Could you tell me what those letters are?"	
Questions without modal	n= 5 (16.7%)
"What'd you say that CV stands for again?"	
"What's the name-- Deborah...?"	
Statement with rising intonation	n= 4 (13.3%)
"The question that you asked was ...?"	
Statement with falling intonation	n= 3 (10%)
"I just missed what you said about..."	
Miscellaneous	n= 2 (7%)

Table 7: Form and Function
Inviting the Professor's Comments
n= 29 (100%)

Yes/No questions	n= 12 (41.4%)
Negative *n= 9*	
"Can't you just call them soft?"	
"Isn't it hyphenated?"	
Affirmative *n= 3*	
"Could that be because they were both seafaring communities?"	
What about/ How about	n= 7 (24.1%)
"What about patois?"	
Statement with falling intonation	n= 4 (13.8%)
"I think I would solve it by saying..."	

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Statement with rising intonation n= 3 (10.3%)

[After professor's slip of the tongue] "Hungarian isn't an Indo-European language?"

Miscellaneous n= 4 (13.8%)

Figure 6: Form and Function
Requests

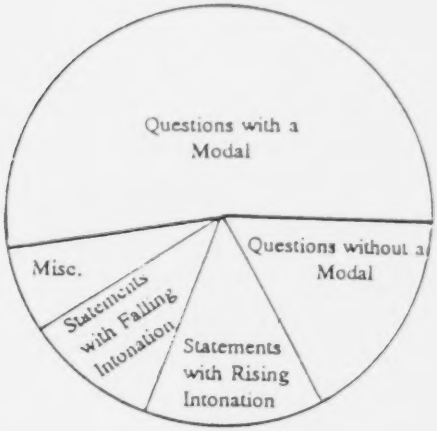
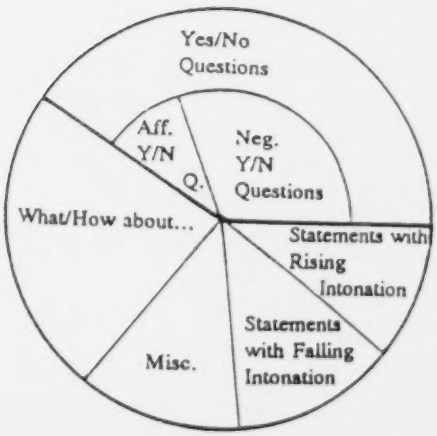


Figure 7: Form and Function
Inviting the Professor's Comments



ANALYSIS OF ESL DATA

Collection of Data

In the initial research design, this study was to have examined the topic of asking questions in class as presented in intermediate to advanced level ESL texts devoted to English for academic purposes. Model utterances were to have been collected from these texts and compared with the actual utterances collected from native speakers. However, when the search of intermediate and advanced level EAP texts revealed a dearth of material, the search was widened to include other types of texts as well as teacher resource books. (ESL materials used in this study are listed separately at the end of the paper.)

Out of the 19 potentially suitable ESL publications examined, 8 had nothing at all on questioning in an academic or other formal setting. Of those publications which did touch on questioning or classroom behavior, one text asked students to observe an American classroom and note students' behavior (Robertson, 1991). Another text was a handbook for use by foreign teaching assistants (Smith, Myers, & Burkhalter, 1992); student questions were approached from the point of view of the teaching assistant who would have to field questions. Four other texts had suitable models for asking questions, including asking for information, clarifying, etc., but placed these models in different contexts such as peer interviews, one-on-one interviews with native speakers, or asking questions in the workplace. The remaining 5 publications supplied model utterances for students to use when asking the professor questions in class. From these 5 sources, then a total of 39 model utterances was collected.

ESL Data: General Observations

With such a small number of model utterances provided by the ESL texts examined, it is not possible to make any statistically significant observations. Of the 5 publications which specifically include model utterances to use when asking questions of professors in class, individual publications tend to be idiosyncratic, with greater emphasis on one form or function over others. Nevertheless, some general observations can be made.

First of all, it is surprising that the topic of American classroom behavior is covered in so few texts, particularly given the number of texts that purport to prepare students for study at an American university.

Secondly, ESL students may need to ask certain types of questions more often than their native speaking classmates (e.g., requests for repetition or writing a word on the blackboard). However, non-native speaking students will share the same range of needs as their native speaking classmates in terms of asking for unknown information, making confirmation checks, inviting the professor to comment on a student-supplied example, contradiction, etc. However, unlike their native speaking classmates, foreign students may not know that such functions are permissible or how to achieve them

ESL and Native Speaker Data Compared

When the model utterances in ESL publications are compared with the data collected from native speakers in the pilot study, some notable differences stand out (See Table 8).

In the area of syntactic form, the ESL models provided almost no examples of statements with rising intonation, although this form accounts for almost 16% of the native speaker utterances and was the preferred syntactic form for confirmation checks.

In terms of use of preface, over two-thirds of the ESL model utterances began with some sort of formulaic preface, while less than one-third of native speaker utterances began with a preface. When these prefactory remarks are compared, the results are somewhat disturbing. Over half of all the ESL model utterances began with an apology or explanation for the student's question; however, in the data collected from native speakers, only a tiny percentage of actual questions were prefaced with an apology or explanation. It seems that the message being sent to ESL students is that they must apologize for asking a question in class, while native speakers obviously do not feel that this is necessary. Not only may teaching overly-polite forms reduce the range of expression available to ESL students (Cf., Thomas, 1983; M. Williams, 1988), but such emphasis may actually be counter-productive. One study, in fact, has suggested that unnecessary length of utterance, such as the over-elaboration of a request through unnecessary prefactory remarks, may serve to annoy the addressee rather than make him or her more amenable (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986).

In the use of address terms, again the ESL publications seem to provide more polite models than native speakers use. Address terms are used in over one-third of the ESL model utterances, while they were almost never used by the native speakers observed in the pilot study.

Over half of the ESL model utterances were devoted to the function of making a request, while requests accounted for only approximately 15% of the native speaker utterances. Even considering the greater need non-native speaking students may have to request repetition or clarification, the emphasis on requests in the ESL publications seems disproportionate.

Conversely, no examples or model utterances are given to ESL students to help them express the function with the greatest possibility of giving offense to the professor, namely inviting the professor's comments on student-supplied information or contradiction. Yet this function accounted for almost 15% of the native speakers' utterances.

Table 8: Notable Differences between NS and ESL Data

Syntax		
	Statements with rising intonation	ESL (100%=30): 3.3%
		NS (100%=214): 15.9%
Preface		
	Use of preface	ESL (100%=39): 69.2%
		NS (100%=229): 31.9%

Apology/ Explanation

ESL (100%=39): 53.8%

NS (100%=229): 2.6%

Use of Address Terms

ESL (100%=39): 36%

NS (100%=229): 1.3%

Functions

Requests

ESL (100%=32): 56.3%

NS (100%=202): 14.9%

Inviting Prof's Comments

ESL (100%=32): 0%

NS (100%=202): 14.4%

CONCLUSIONS FROM THIS PILOT STUDY

Asking questions in class is culturally specific behavior largely ignored by ESL publications. Where the topic is dealt with at all, the model utterances do not represent the range of form and functions used by native speakers. Furthermore, ESL publications tend to teach students to be more polite than native speakers actually are.

Results from Native Speaker Data

Results from the pilot study of how native speakers ask questions in class suggest that native speakers tend to use interrogatives for asking for unknown information and often use a statement with rising intonation to confirm their understanding. Interrogatives, especially those formed with modals or other indirect forms, are used as measures of politeness when a request is made. The potentially face-threatening act of inviting the professor's comments on a student-supplied example, solution, or contradiction is hedged with indirect forms, such as interrogatives or statements with rising intonation, in order to soften the potential for offense. However, native speakers use prefactory comments for a question relatively infrequently and almost never apologize for asking a question in class. Furthermore, in this pilot study, native speaking students very rarely addressed their professors by name or title when asking a question.

Suggestions for Further Study

As the data collection from native speakers was a pilot study conducted with a sample of convenience, further research needs to be done to determine how generalizable the results

are. For example, questioning behavior in very large lecture classes or very small seminars may differ from the results in this study. Furthermore, this study was conducted in linguistics classes; would the same types of functions and similar forms be used in different disciplines? The observed linguistics classes were composed of a high proportion of women to men (an average of 4 to 1); would classes with a greater proportion of men display different patterns of questioning? The observed population was composed of graduate students, many of whom are already working. Would similar results obtain in a younger population of undergraduate students? The study was conducted in New York, on the outskirts of the metropolitan area, a region stereotyped among non-New Yorkers for lack of politeness. Would there be different or greater use of politeness markers, more frequent prefactory apologies or explanations, or greater use of address terms if a similar study were conducted in another area of the United States or Canada?

More information needs to be collected on the actual questioning behavior of newly arrived foreign students in their content classes. Empirical data would help ESL teachers know what kinds of behavior and questioning forms need to be taught and practiced and what can be taken for granted.

The study concentrated on verbal communication. Related research could also include studies of paralinguistic data and professors' responses to students' questions.

Teaching Implications

ESL students preparing for or engaged in university study in the U.S. need instruction and practice not only in language skills but also in the pragmatics attached to using those skills. By using the data collected from native speakers in the pilot study reported here, some general observations can be made about what foreign students need to be able to do if they wish to ask questions of their professors in class:

(1) Since interrogatives comprise the bulk of forms used for asking questions in class, students should be able to formulate WH- and yes/no questions with grammatical accuracy.
(2) Because statements with rising intonation at the end are frequently used as confirmation checks, students should be able to recognize and produce such forms.
(3) Students should be able to use certain common formulaic expressions to preface a question, particularly those with the words question or wonder.
(4) Although students should know how to address a professor, they need not use an address term when asking a question in class.
(5) Students should be able to use the correct level of politeness markers, particularly when making a request or inviting a professor's comments. Such forms include: use of interrogatives in both functions; use of modal auxiliaries, particularly the word could in requests; and use of negative interrogatives to invite comment on a perceived disagreement.

The academic preparation of ESL students should address the problem of asking questions in class and be based on actual native speaker behavior. Students need to know not only that asking questions is part of the American educational culture, but that there are rules governing how questions are asked and that these rules can be learned and the forms practiced.

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